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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3747  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3606  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 4295  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 4232

C O N F I D E N T I A L ASHGABAT 001667

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/28/2019

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: PROTESTANT CHURCH HOLDS CHRISTMAS  
PAGEANT

REF: A. ASHGABAT 723

[1](#)B. ASHGABAT 1642

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) On December 28, poloff attended a special Christmas holiday service organized by the registered Greater Grace Church, which is affiliated with a Baltimore-based organization of the same name (Ref A). The church had sent a glossy printed holiday greeting card and invitation to the Embassy announcing the event. While the church has a regular rented meeting place located in the basement of a commercial building, the Christmas pageant was held in a much larger banquet facility, a converted movie theater, which is typically used for wedding receptions. The event, which was held on a Monday evening, attracted an audience of around 175 people, in addition to roughly 25 performers. Upon arrival, all attendees were given a CD containing religious music.

[1](#)2. (C) Pastor Vladimir Tolmachev stressed to poloff that the event was not a worship service, but a "Christmas performance." Still, at the beginning, the event was typical of the church's regular worship services, with prayer and singing, followed by a sermon. Roughly a dozen attendees identified themselves as first-time visitors when asked. The sermon, with a highly evangelistic message, was delivered by a visiting Finnish pastor with a long record of missionary work in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. He spoke English, with interpretation by a young local pastor who recently returned from two years of religious studies in Baltimore. The Finnish pastor was well known to the congregation, although he said he had not been able to obtain a Turkmen visa for the past seven years. For this visit, he had been able to obtain a visa officially as a guest of the church. He said that, despite the official letter of invitation, he had been afraid he would be turned around at the airport, as had happened to him earlier this year in Uzbekistan, but he had faced no difficulties upon arrival. Following a three-day visit in Ashgabat, he was going to travel to Mary city to visit the church's branch there. After the sermon, the event did indeed become a Christmas pageant, complete with three kings in robes and turbans, a nativity scene acted out under the canopy that usually shelters newlyweds, music by a chorus and sparklers.

13. (C) COMMENT: Such an event, which might be considered routine elsewhere, was noteworthy in Turkmenistan in several respects. The government had allowed a foreigner to come to Turkmenistan for religious purposes involving a religious minority group, a rare occurrence. The church, which openly conducts "street evangelism," used this event both to celebrate the holiday and to proselytize newcomers. Religious music distributed on CDs, apparently downloaded from the Internet, highlighted the availability of religious materials through nontraditional channels, despite government restrictions. Finally, in a country where minority religious groups are forced to maintain a low profile by government restrictions on their activities, this church was extraordinarily open in conducting its Christmas pageant. Given the difficulties that other groups still face (Ref B), the event unfortunately remains an exception. Nevertheless, it was a positive occurrence in a country where religious freedom is definitely not the rule. END COMMENT.  
CURRAN